



THREE PRACTICES TO HELP ENGLISH TEACHERS *Thrive*

By Zane G. Porter

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Abstract: This article encourages English language arts and reading (ELAR) teachers to take hold of their ability to thrive in the classroom by suggesting three practices that will facilitate that quest. Many ELAR teachers show the signs of burnout and a defeatist mindset too early in their careers. The author seeks to provide constructive ways for teachers to manage their emotional and occupational well-being. The practices include focusing on one's identity and finding camaraderie with peers, being realistic about grading, and returning to what most English teachers enjoy the most: reading, writing, and pedagogy. Teachers should continue reading for pleasure, writing to reflect, and seeking out ways to grow and learn as a teacher. This article uses the author's experiences and his own growth as a secondary and post-secondary ELAR teacher to substantiate the practices and illustrate them. While this article does not provide definitive answers, and is subjective, it does suggest valuable ideas to enable small incremental changes in the lives of ELAR teachers.

Keywords: English, ELAR, thrive, practices, identity

Teaching is a profession that is actualized in front of a live and usually juvenile audience. Sometimes the weaknesses and misfires can be sidestepped without anyone being the wiser. Other times, the mistakes are magnified and the consequences are devastating for the learners, the teacher, or both. Teaching English adds another level of difficulty to this situation because much of what is taught and assessed is subjective or hard to measure with clear data. The subjective nature of ELAR instruction and assessment leads to a greater freedom in the classroom, but it also fosters a more intense feeling of insecurity and stress for the teacher during instruction, lesson planning, and student-work evaluation. Duncan Grey (2007) adds in his book *First Aid Kit for Teachers* that “work pressures in schools are more intense than in many work environments” because the teacher is trying to do what is best for multiple classrooms of children and the community (p. 127). Many times, these pressures are at war with personal and professional goals and trying to maximize effort in all areas leads to burnout.

I love my job. I enjoy teaching and inspiring young writers, but it is exhausting. This exhaustion facilitates temporary burnout, moodiness, withdrawing from groups and other school events, headaches, insecurity about taking so long, self-defeating thoughts about teaching inadequacies, and a temporary interest in other occupations. In a study on English teacher burnout, Cephe (2010) identified the symptoms of burnout as anxiety, anger, frustration,

depression, tension, powerlessness, hopelessness, failure, detachment, and feeling of inability. These are serious concerns and need to be addressed well, or the burnt-out teacher will not last long.

It is unrealistic to avoid these symptoms altogether, so how should a teacher counteract them? I do not have a magic bullet, but I do have three practices that have allowed me to refresh again and again to gain a better perspective on my situation as an ELAR teacher.

Remember Who You Are

Teaching is such a client-focused profession, and it is easy to lose sight of one's identity. The stress of teaching and the excitement that comes from instilling passion in others can become overwhelming and cause teachers to forget to care for themselves. I have a former student who accepted her first English teaching position this year, and she has already spent half of her first paycheck on classroom items that she believes her classroom will need. The passion is great, but it will lead to feelings of stress and becoming overwhelmed during the school year. These stressors are especially focused on the new teacher who has not fallen into a healthy groove yet (Harris, 2011). The excessive spending and hyperfocused attention on the classroom are not sustainable. Therefore, the English teachers seeking to thrive in the profession for many years needs to focus on themselves by recognizing who they are apart from teaching and by building camaraderie with faculty and staff in the building.

It is a difficult task to remember that teaching is only part of one's identity when so much of the school year is spent trying to stay above water. The responsibilities of the classroom and the demands of the administration, parents, and professional pride make it tough to see anything else but the workload. Harris (2011) mentions that this stress comes from the "perceived demands along with a lack of perceived resources," varied classroom demands, new or changing initiatives and standards, a lack of quality professional development, role ambiguity and conflict, and classroom management difficulties

(p. 106). No matter what stresses teachers the most, they cannot allow those stressors to cloud their personal identity outside of the school doors. Each person's identity is wrapped up in many other ideals such as family, friendship, hobbies, and personal learning. Teachers must take some time to devote to other areas of their lives beyond teaching. This must be the rule, not the occasional reward.

For me, and the majority of teachers, teaching is a calling and not simply a paycheck. However, it is also a marathon that requires patience and a steady pace. If your identity revolves around winning the imaginary race or perfecting an individual marking period, you will lose sight of the entire race and fizzle out prematurely. In the long run, one's exhaustion will have a narrower positive effect because one will either not enjoy teaching anymore or will change careers due to stress.

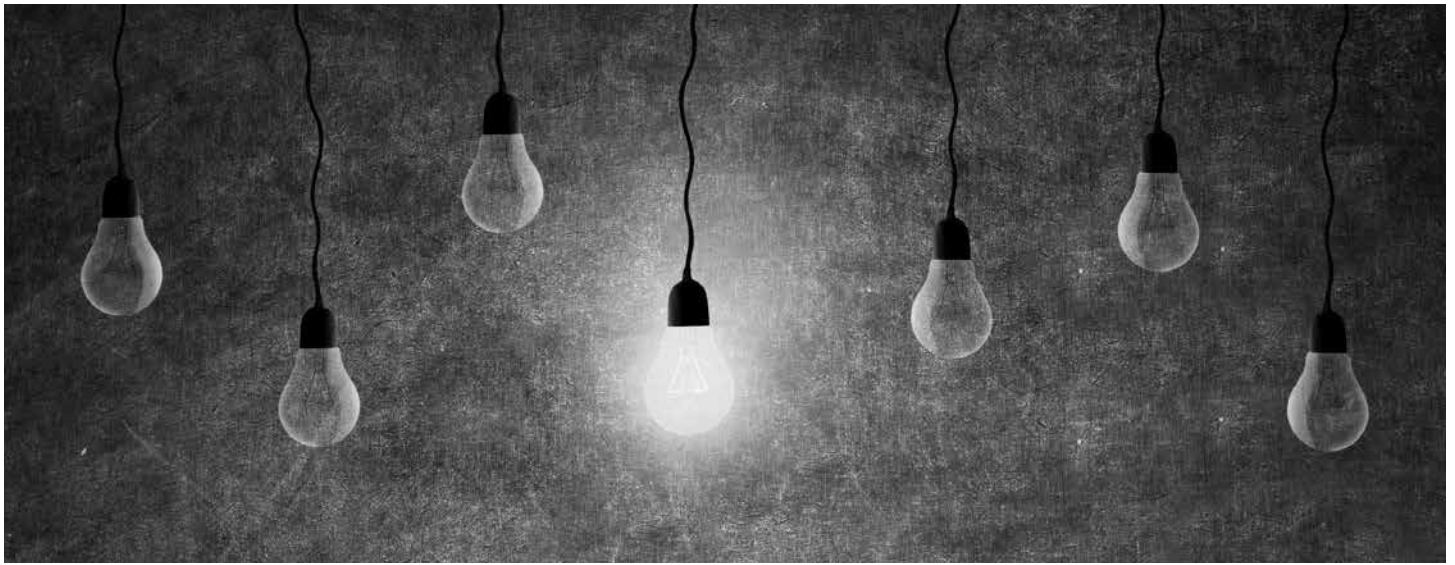
Recognize that teaching is only part of your identity so that you may begin building healthy relationships with work and your personal life. Teachers have the power to see the situations around them as they please. Donald H. Graves (2001) states that "we have the power to change our interpretations of events and make a difference to ourselves and the children we teach" (p. 10). Sometimes it is tough to believe that a personal break will be okay. There have been times in my professional life where I thought a break would leave me unprepared for teaching, but one must see the bigger picture. Grey (2007) encourages teachers to "create a fixed boundary" for themselves (p. 128). He offers that teachers should choose some nights per week where they do something for themselves and do not plan or grade or think about school. They should guard those times and work to create a habit or schedule that will stick. If teachers allow the pressures of school and the classroom to consume their personal lives, the unhealthy lifestyle will begin to produce burnout and student achievement will drop. Students will know. They can sense when the teacher is spent and does not live a balanced life.

By nature, I call myself an introvert. I can be loud and have fun in groups, but being with people exhausts me—I would rather do most things alone. This works its way into my teaching and preparation style. I could sit in my classroom and plan, prepare, deliver, and assess without seeking any outside influence apart from my textbooks and the Internet. However, that would be a massive mistake. Being at my best requires the input of others through collaboration. At each school I have worked, I have been blessed to find administrators and teachers with whom I could find camaraderie.

Finding those people can be difficult, especially for new teachers and those with independent pride or insecurities that keep them from reaching out. Good friends will speak into your craft and listen to observations, praises, and critiques. They will listen, act appropriately, and feel at ease to share their struggles and accomplishments. No one wants to feel used, so the best relationships occur when both parties benefit and take ownership of the relationship.

Mentors are not always helpful, and the relationship is usually one-sided. Preservice and probationary teachers often complain of mentors being ill-prepared to help them, speaking negatively about peer interactions and relationships, and trying to problem solve over having a conversation. Many times, the discussion tends to highlight previous negative situations or what one must endure as part of one's teacher duties. Teachers are surrounded by students and teachers all day, but "teaching can be lonely. It isn't the proximity to others that we need; it is the conversations about how we plan for instruction and the risks we are taking in order to





engage more students” (Gallagher & Kittle, 2018, p. 21). A mentor or a forced relationship rarely fills this need.

My mentor was not helpful during my first year as a teacher, but I found camaraderie with others in the building, including a principal. In my second position, I found a neighboring teacher and multiple principals to confide in; in my current position, a fellow humanities teacher buoys me with support. These men and women have walked with me through my teaching and learning. They have shared professional and personal reading and learning goals, made themselves available to talk and work through problems, celebrated my victories even when I didn’t see them as victories, and sought me out periodically just to talk or check in. I have returned these favors and we have encouraged one another through the years. That is what I mean. However, teachers do not need a horde of close relationships—that is not realistic. Graves (2001) argues in *The Energy to Teach*, “One significant relationship is enough to sustain anyone professionally” (p. 16). He also states that “energy begets energy” to explain how teachers can feed off of one another (p. 138). Do school and life together—lean on one another and pick one another up.

Sometimes this task of finding a significant relationship on campus will seem overwhelming. Put out feelers. Test the waters with a neighboring teacher. Take a risk or two and have some conversations. Some teachers only want to complain and share their classroom horror stories. Stay away from them and spend time with the genuinely positive teachers and administrators (Gildner, 2001, p. 93). Once you find a willing peer, the benefits will outweigh the temporary awkwardness and you can begin to thrive.

Grading (Try to Leave It at School)

I have a personal goal to return graded work in under a week’s time. Many times, I return papers the next class period. For me and the way I organize my instruction, I try to allow as little downtime between drafts, reflection, and reassessment. My instruction runs at optimal speed, and learning has the greatest impact and retention, when I run a tight ship. Therefore, if a full week goes by before learners receive feedback from me, the most teachable moments have passed and the learners will lose interest in the objectives.

It is not uncommon that I receive 30 to 50 essays on a Friday and begin grading as soon as the last bell rings. That time is usually

interrupted with learners turning in late essays and others asking for more help. Earlier in my career, I took the essays home for the weekend and carved out four or five hours to comment and grade. To be completely honest, I have stayed up until 3 or 4 AM trying to get through some of the grading. Spending 5 to 15 minutes per paper takes *forever*, and the papers in need of the most help may take longer.

Now, I try to leave the stack of unread assessments on my desk or select only a handful to do at home; I am getting better at this—with practice. If I bring them all home, I will spend too much time grading and not living my life, or I will not get to them, feel guilty, and become discouraged. *Just leave them at school. They will still be there the next day.* I have to remind myself of this over and over because the paper load is ever-present. Carol Gildner (2001) advises teachers to use the whole school day for grading (p. 86). Find every nugget of time and exploit it, making sure not to procrastinate. I have known many teachers who socialize every chance they get during the school day and then complain about how much work they have to take home or how busy they are. Do not be those people. Having conversations throughout the day is fine and helpful, but be mindful of the time that may be wasted on such pursuits.

I must read the papers—I teach composition. However, evaluating takes a toll on my body, emotions, mental endurance, and classroom instruction. It is a great feeling to finish a stack of essays, but I know that the next stack is coming quickly. I do my best to read and benchmark along the way, but there is no shortcut to good observation and writing instruction—each essay must be read. Whether one teaches in a primary, secondary, or post-secondary environment, the pressures are similar. As a third-grade teacher, Penny Kittle used to stay at school so late she had to climb the locked chain-link fence to get back to her car (Gallagher & Kittle, 2018, p. 2).

Fight to leave the bulk of the grading at school. Fight to protect your conference periods and your before and after school times. This is not always easy with tutoring, meetings, duty stations, and every other activity that teachers do during the day, but work to protect time for planning and grading. Teachers, administrators, and school cultures establish a routine and if something happens once, it may be hard to say no to it the next time. I have learned to think before saying yes to any extra duty that is optional. We all want to help and be a contributing member of the team, but

if helping overtaxes your schedule and negatively impacts student achievement, then you are forsaking your primary duty.

Another strategy to help reduce the paper load is to allow learners to peer- or self-assess. Build some of the grading into the class instruction and reflection time and teach students to grade one another's work. I will never forget being in Mrs. K's seventh-grade science class during the unit on dissecting frogs. I finished my dissection before anyone else, and she took her time to make sure I knew what I had done. Then, she gave me a clipboard with the class roster on it and asked me to assess my peers' understanding of their dissections. I learned more that day about dissection than I could ever have if she graded everyone's dissection lab herself. She gave me the tools and the encouragement to be an expert and that made all the difference. I feel that moment in my life every time I ask a student to peer-assess, so I work to equip students to become the experts. Find ways to make the smaller assessments and benchmarks a teaching tool. Then, go home and unplug and don't feel guilty.

Consider the type and amount of work you assign. Our classes should be full of assessment, but not necessarily grades. I don't want to spend two hours grading an assignment that took the students only 15 minutes to complete. Think about how those smaller assignments might be assessed in class or as a group. Can the students share out after collaborating with a partner or a small group? The teacher will still hear where the struggles are and will notice where adjustments need to be made. Gildner (2001) challenges classroom teachers to "think several times before assigning unneeded paperwork" (p. 85). The grading alone should motivate this contemplation, but even more importantly, think of other ways this information can come alive in class without worksheets and busy work.

Return to Reading, Writing, and Teaching

Reading (Read for Pleasure)

There was a point in graduate school when I was reading so much assigned material for my classes (so much I couldn't read it all) that I forgot about reading for pleasure. I forgot about the escape and the pleasure I once found while reading self-selected novels and poetry. For some reason, I felt as if when I read for pleasure, I was wasting time I could have been using to study. That bled into my teaching life. I felt as if when I was reading self-selected materials, I was cheating on my students by not using that time to prepare better lessons and having higher standards for myself as an educator.

It took trying to model good reading habits for my seventh graders for me to remember the joy of reading. As part of Silent Sustained Reading, I read with my students. I chose a book and took 15 minutes out of my day to read what I wanted. It was really 10 minutes because I spent some of that time redirecting students back to their books. At that point, I was also reading *Readicide* by Kelly Gallagher (2009) in my professional reading. Gallagher encourages teachers to have a place in their rooms where students can see what they are reading. In this way, students will see that their teacher is a reader and students will attach value, authority, and intelligence to reading for pleasure and purpose. Regie Routman (2000) writes, "As a learner, I am open and eager to wonder, inquire, discover, observe, try out, reflect, rethink, and revise my thinking and teaching" (p. 2). For me, this sort of growing is catalyzed by being in quality books for pleasure and professional gain.

Many of the side conversations I have with students and peers are about what I am reading and what they are reading. English

teachers do themselves and their students a disservice if they lose their passion for reading and learning apart from the classroom. Discontinuing a reading lifestyle implies that learning and growth are unnecessary. In *Conversations*, Routman (2000) quotes Bissex (1996) who advocates that teachers must present themselves as "model learners" more than "model knowers" (p. 2). Our students will be encouraged by our passion to grow and learn with them. They want to be co-learners with us instead of seeing us as the sage or the keeper of knowledge. If we want our learners to be readers, then we need to be readers. I like the simplicity of what Kelly Gallagher and Penny Kittle (2018) write in their book *180 Days*: "It seems obvious to say, but readers are people who read" (p. 13). Start slow. Read with a group or as part of a book club. It does not matter: just read and grow.

Writing (Write to Reflect)

We preach the value of writing every day in class. We encourage students to have a voice and to share it with the world. "You will need writing in every profession," we say. "You must be able to communicate your thoughts with clarity," we say. Yet, we waiver to write ourselves. Some of our blogs, journals, and reflection devices have not been touched in months. Pick up a pen or open a new Google Doc and write. Write to recount the day and to reflect on the situations that could have been handled better. It will take five minutes. Write about a lesson knocked out of the ballpark. Write about the ladybug clinging to the window screen. It doesn't matter. Just write.

Writing will help calm and clarify one's thoughts on the page. Write to a goal by keeping a weekly blog, daily journal, or answering a call for manuscripts. Whatever it is, write! There is no need to share your writing, but sometimes sharing provides accountability and motivation. At the moment, I have three paper journals and a couple electronic journals that I write in, not because I am an overachiever (far from it), but because I don't want to give myself an excuse not to write. If I always have a journal close, it is easier to give up scrolling my Twitter timeline or checking Facebook and put ink (or pixels) on the page.

A strategy to create time for journaling is to build journaling into some lessons. Students need to write and reflect more too, so open up 10 to 15 minutes a class (or every other class) to write and journal. Then, write with them. Build journaling time into at least three classes a week, and that will become 30 to 45 minutes a week to write. The teacher and the students will begin building better writing voices for themselves, and students will be encouraged by the teacher model.

Once you get going, I challenge you to share your experiences. Writing can be completely reflective, but you also have something to say that no one else can. Your perspective adds to the conversation—don't ignore it! Share it.

Seek Innovation (Explore New Ideas)

Finally, seek out and explore new ideas and ways of teaching. The old image of an almost-retired English teacher sitting behind his or her large wooden desk bleeding on papers and correcting everyone's grammar is long gone. Reading and writing productively in our brave new ELAR world are constantly changing. As teachers of students who will engage in mediums of discourse which are currently undiscovered and unknown, we must teach students to think, reason, read, write, listen, speak, and communicate in ways

that are fluid with many mediums. How can we do that unless we are engaged in the most current methods?

I follow many teachers and educators on Twitter, read blogs and articles, attend conferences, listen to podcasts, fumble with Snapchat, Instagram, and Facebook, and watch TED talks and YouTube videos. Whatever I can find that will expose me to different perspectives on teaching ELAR, I try to listen. There is no way one person can get to it all, so I rely on others to recommend resources. It doesn't have to be formal either. Just today, I received an email from a friend recommending a podcast and an article to read. We share what matters to us. This seeking leads us into conversations about growth rather than always talking about the ills of standardized testing or the antics of the wayward student in seventh period.

Teachers must keep learning and seeking or they will become complacent in their methods and practices. I do not change my pedagogy with every new method, but I consider costs and benefits of each. The act of exploring and taking risks is risky. We are forced to question our methods and step into vulnerable spaces to explore new ones. But I am convinced that without seeking a better way, the thriving will cease and our craft will atrophy.

Conclusion

This list of three practices is not meant to be exhaustive. Select one or two (or even part of one) and begin to make small incremental changes. A teaching career is a marathon. Minor victories along

the way will prove major dividends years down the line. I am starting my tenth year as an ELAR teacher, and I can point to the little moments reproduced over the past nine years that have led to major changes in the way I teach and thrive as an educator today. No one expects us to have it all together all of the time. We must be honest with ourselves and our progress. Then, work to fuel our fire and thrive as a teacher.

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